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ABSTRACT

The proposition can be offered that the notion of "the plant" should be the paradigmatic metaphor for modern conceptions of the composing process. Various forms of the metaphor are found in classical and eighteenth century writings alike. A modern shift in focus from writing product to process has brought to the fore the dynamic organicism view which capitalizes on the mysterious, idiosyncratic, yet orderly growth of the plant. Further, the metaphor allows promoters of the "New Rhetoric" to associate themselves with Nature. While organicism can lead to the demise of autonomy, it can be reworked to put the "rhetor" (speaker) back into rhetoric. Proponents of the political goals of the New Rhetoric should direct efforts toward developing strategies and attitudes which capitalize on the revisionary opportunities of writing and which aid the student in incorporating the properties of speech in the composing process. (Twenty-one references are attached.) (SG)

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# "Organic Rhetoric": The Growth of a Trope in Modern Composition Theory

Several current historiographers of rhetoric regard "organicism" as a major distinguishing feature of modern composition theory. "Modern rhetoric," write Knoblauch and Branon, "tries to define the *process* of composing, not the shapes of texts, assuming that the process is organic..." (80). James Berlin, likewise, finds inspiration for his "alternative rhetoric" in the organic conceptions of Fred Newton Scott, whose guiding metaphor, "is that of the plant" (84). Indeed, "organicism" has become such a ubiquitous and malleable concept, serving both to inform and justify many of the assumptions of the so-called New Rhetoric, that an examination of its various meanings for composition and the history of rhetoric seems very much in order. In what follows I will, to begin with, outline the genesis of modern and ancient theories of organic rhetoric, discuss some critiques of the concept, and, last, put into question the notion that "the plant" ought to be the paradigmatic metaphor for modern conceptions of the composing process.

As anyone, however, will soon discover in researching the historic roots of this topic, plant metaphors *are* everywhere. In his 1774 *Essay on Genius*, Alexander Gerard, employing what M.H. Abrams calls "an analogue pregnant with implications for literary psychology," writes, "when a vegetable draws in moisture from the earth, nature, by the same action by which it draws it in, and at the same time, converts it to the nourishment of the plant: it at once circulates through its vessels, and is assimilated to its several parts. In like manner, genius arranges its ideas by the same operation, and almost at the same time, that it collects them" (qtd. in Abrams 167). As can be

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gleaned from Gerard, the "organic" is part of a cluster of ideas having to do with one of preromanticism's favorite topics, original genius. Together, organicism and originality form one of the battlefronts in the eighteenth-century struggle between the followers of Art and the devotees of Nature. To quote from Mark Akenside's *Pleasures of Imagination*, published in 1744, "fruitless is the attempt/ By dull obedience and the curb of rules,/ For creeping toil to climb the hard ascent/ Of high Parnassus. Nature's kindling breath/ Must fire the chosen genius" (125). Described in the most glowing terms, Akenside's idealized writer composes not according to tyrannic rules, but by the promptings of his inner genius, in what has to be the ultimate paean to process: "Hither now,/ Now thither fluctuates his inconstant aim,/ With endless choice perplexed. At length his plan/ Begins to open. Lucid order dawns; And, as from Chaos old jarring seeds/ Of Nature, at the voice divine, repaired/ Each to its place, till rosy earth unveiled/ Her fragrant bosom, and the joyful sun/ Sprung up the blue serene, by swift degrees/ Thus disentangled, his entire design Emerges" (qtd. in Lessenich 133). Would that every Freshman's essay, or every 4C's paper, unfolded so ingeniously.

But the *hortus classicus* of the eighteenth-century genius genre is, of course, Edward Young's *Conjectures on Original Composition*, published in 1759. A codification of theoretical speculation on genius and inspiration initiated at the beginning of the century by Joseph Addison, Young's work has been characterized as the *Ars Poetica* of Romanticism. As such, it gathers together several concepts which would become mainstays of Romantic rhetoric. "An Original may be said to be of a vegetable nature" writes Young. "It rises spontaneously from the vital root of genius; it grows, it is not made: Imitations are often a sort of manufacture wrought up by those mechanics, art, and labour, out of preexistent materials not their own" (224). Here we see the not terribly original opposition between the spontaneous growth of original genius, and the labored contrivance of imitative art. However, in Young's work, the political implications of organic originality are brought to the fore: "human souls, thro' all periods," he writes, "are equal; that due care, and exertion, would set us nearer our immortal predecessors than we are at present" (225).

The discrepancy between the untapped genius of the common man and the cultivated genius of the great authors, ancient and modern is, for Young, less fundamental than the tiny number of canonized works might lead us to suppose: "Many a genius, probably, there has been, which could neither write, nor read. So that genius, that supreme lustre of literature, is less rare than you conceive" (230). Indeed, the "grandees of all kings owe more of their elevation to the littleness of other minds, than to the greatness of their own" (235). I emphasize the political dimension of Young's argument in order not only to refute those who interpret the Romantic "cult of genius" as basically authoritarian in character, but also to suggest that there is more at stake in organic theories of composition than plants, or even composition: at least composition conceived of as "good writing."

To better appreciate the specific nature of eighteenth century organic theory, we need only contrast it to that of Plato, whose organicism stresses the formal rather than the dynamic potential of the metaphor. Criticizing Lisias' speech in the *Phaedrus*, Socrates remarks, "you will allow that every discourse ought to be a living creature, having a body of its own and a head and feet" (268). Socrates heaps as much scorn on the "parts of the speech"--the exordium, statement of facts, proofs, confirmation and refutation--prescribed by the sophistic handbooks, as we pour on the five-paragraph essay. In opposition to such procrustean ordering Socrates would follow an altogether different principle, "that of division into species according to the natural formation, where the joint is, not breaking any part as a bad carver might" (269). And this is to be achieved not through the superficial rules of rhetoric, but through the process of division and subdivision which Plato, in another place, terms dialectic.

But however much Plato and Young may stand together in their opposition to the mindless application of preestablished classifications or rules, they differ significantly in their assessment of the damage done by the mechanization of discourse. Whereas Plato mourns the mutilation wrought by a surgeon following a template, Young focuses on the damage done to the mind of the composer. "Born Originals," he wonders, "how comes it to pass that we die Copies? That

meddling ape Imitation, as soon as we come to years of Indiscretion (so let me speak), snatches the pen, and blots our nature's mark of separation, cancels her kind intention, destroys all mental individuality" (232). Thus, whereas Plato's organicism replaces the strictures of the handbooks with the structure of a dialectically dissectable subject matter to which the writer must defer, Young's encourages the cultivation of individual difference: "Therefore dive deep into thy bosom," he exhorts, "learn the depth, extent, bias, and full fort of thy mind; contract full intimacy with the stranger within thee...let thy genius rise" (234).

It almost goes without saying that the organic formalism pioneered by Plato has, for the last two decades, come under rather devastating attack. Ironically, the metaphor itself has been most forcefully challenged by the champion of modern formalism, W. K. Wimsatt: "We might ask of Plato, what are the foot, body, and head of a poem? Or of Aristotle, what are the beginning, middle, or end of a squirrel or tree?" (5). In addition, Derrida's critique of structuralism, DeMan's demystification of the symbol, and Stanley Fish's pulverization of the intentional and affective fallacies have made the notion of the self-sustained work of art, whose reified whole is always greater than the sum of its reified parts, no longer viable.

Dynamic organicism on the other hand still seems alive and kicking, at least in modern composition theory. The shift in focus from product to process has brought to the fore a metaphor which, capitalizing on the mysterious, idiosyncratic, yet orderly growth of the plant, does indeed seem to mirror important aspects of the writing process. Moreover, it has allowed the promoters of the New Rhetoric to affiliate their theories with Nature--an effort as old as the rhetorical hills. The New Rhetoric is not only good, it's good for you: it's organic. Lest, therefore, the New Rhetoric go the way of the New Criticism, or Oat Bran, we need to interrogate its leading metaphor.

In her trenchant work, *Words and Values: Some Leading Words and Where they Lead Us*, Peggy Rosenthal examines the growth and development of Growth and Development--two key words which not only enable a great deal of the fuzzy thinking characteristic of the human potential

movement, but also help to distinguish dynamic from formal organicism . As she points out, *Growth* is as old as the English language, sharing its root with *Green* and *Grass*. Extended to humans (the *Childe growid*) and abstractions (*error growid*) in the Middle Ages, Growth, by the sixteenth century, "had taken on the additional sense of direction and goal." *Develop* entered the language during the Renaissance via French. Meaning literally to unwrap or unfold, it "carries in its etymology the idea of latency, of an inner something to be brought out in the process of development" (48). It is in the phenomenon of plant life that "growth" (toward a unique form) and "develop" (from a seed within) intertwine; and it is for this reason, as Rosenthal points out, that theories of "vegetable genius" became rampant among those thinkers who wished to promote such qualities in the human kingdom. Moreover, the plant, endowed with an implicit teleology, would become, in the nineteenth century, the explicit and implicit guiding metaphor of such apparently diverse thinkers as Darwin, Spenser, Hegel, Marx, in their various theories of an inevitably unfolding natural, social, spiritual, or historical process.

However, just as theories of evolution can lead to the extinction of God--there's just nothing for the supreme being to do anymore--and just as theories of historic inevitability lead to the demise of the autonomous self, so the deterministic implications of the organic metaphor, as Rosenthal and Abrams point out, leads to a conception of writing in which conscious human deliberation and choice can seem little more than an interruption of the "natural process." Thus the possibility of freedom from external rules which dynamic organicism seems to promise is bought at the expense of submission to impersonal forces operating from within--a troubling conception indeed for those of us who see ourselves as attempting to increase the range of deliberate choices available to our students. For this reason, I would argue, the "organic" as guiding or controlling metaphor of modern composition theory ought to be abandoned--or perhaps repotted--while the political goal of its initial adoption retained. In its place I would put another (where would we be without our metaphors?) which, I think, succeeds in opposing the imposition of tyrannic rules, while, at the same time, not lapsing into an easy automatism. Moreover, as I hope to show, it was

the guiding metaphor all along.

To uncover it, we must look beneath the leafy foliage of vegetable genius to the social and rhetorical context in which such theories appeared. As any standard history of English shows, the Eighteenth century, despite Adam Smith's rhetorical presence, was generally not a time of linguistic laissez-faire. In fact, works like Young's *Conjectures* can only be seen as running contrary to the dominant trend in eighteenth-century attitudes toward the English language, what Sterling Leonard has called "the doctrine of correctness." Nourished by the Newtonian belief in an ordered cosmos, the Biblical faith in an originally pure language, as well as rising middle-class anxiety over appropriate social-linguistic behavior, the eighteenth-century mania for supreme linguistic authority is perhaps best represented in the movement to establish an academy of English along the lines of the Academie Francaise. "Our language is extremely imperfect" (108), complained Jonathan Swift, a major proponent of the movement, in 1712, "...Beside the Grammar-part, wherein we are owed to be very defective, they will observe many gross Improprieties, which however authorized by Practice, and grown familiar, ought to be discarded" (116). And, although the movement for a French-style committee of correctness withered under the benign neglect of German speaking King George, the drive to standardize English was, if anything, picking up steam in the latter part of the century. Reports Leonard, "Whereas fewer than fifty writings on grammar, rhetoric, criticism, and linguistic theory have been listed for the first half of the eighteenth century, and still fewer for all the period before 1600, the publication in the period of 1750-1800 exceeded two hundred titles. And most of these were concerned in whole or in part with solecisms, barbarisms, improprieties, and questions of precision in the use of English" (12).

As we have seen, however, Young waas not alone in swimming aagainst this tide. C.M. Millward notes that the Whigs, earlier in the century, saw the academy proposal as a power play by the Tories and, accordingly, had opposed it on political grounds (209). Samuel Johnson, his ambition to refine and fix the language chastened by his experience in compiling his dictionary,

would remark of Swift's proposal that, "The certainty and stability which, contrary to all experience, he thinks attainable, he proposes to secure by instituting an academy; the decrees of which every man would have been willing, and many would have been proud to disobey" ("Preface" to *Dictionary*, qtd. in Baugh & Cable 268). And, on the far left, Joseph Priestly, himself the author of a grammar and rhetoric, averred that an Academy was "not only unsuitable to the genius of a free nation, but in itself ill calculated to reform and fix a language." He continued, "We need make no doubt that the best forms of speech will, in time, establish themselves by their own superior excellence: and, in all controversies, it is better to wait the decisions of time, which are slow and sure, than to take those of synods, which are often hasty and injudicious" (*Grammar* qtd. in Baugh & Cable 269).

Just what Young, Priestly, and the later Romantics were resisting, then, in their various claims to an "organic" conception of composition should now be clear: the standardization of language, which, as Young perceived, leads inevitably to a standardization of humanity: "the lettr'd world no longer consists of singulars, it is a medly, a mass; and a hundred books, at bottom, are but One" (245). A few years later, William Blake, the illustrator of Young's *Night Thoughts*, would describe Urizen's Book of eternal Brass, which, written in solitude, contained "One command, one joy, one desire,/ One curse, one weight, one measure, /One King, one God, one Law" (II, 38-40). Seen in this light, Young's and Blake's association of tyranny with the letter, the book, or with writing itself, suggests that the real struggle in the eighteenth century wasn't so much between inorganic and organic, machine versus plant, as it was between the written and the spoken, or to put it in terms developed by Parry, Lord, Havelock, Ong and others, literate versus oral forms of communication. The craze for correctnessis, then, can be seen a perhaps inevitable expression of print culture, which, by creating the illusion of the fixed text, fostered the illusion of a fixable language.

Indeed, what Dryden could write about the Bible in the late seventeenth century, that "*Tradition written* therefore more commends/ *Authority*, than from the *Voice* descends" ("Religio

Laici," qtd. in Engell 36), would be extended to all printed matter in the eighteenth, when, according to Harvey Graff, "the final ideological underpinning for the 'modern' and 'liberal' reforms of popular schooling and institution building" came into being, with the goal of universal literacy its cornerstone and rallying cry. Although we generally associate literacy with emancipation--the autobiography of Frederick Douglas always springs to mind--we also need to keep in mind that literacy has also functioned brilliantly as a tool of social control. Comments Graff in *The Legacies of Literacy*, "The inculcation of values, habits norms, and attitudes to transform the masses, rather than skills alone or *per se*, was the developing task of schooling and its legitimating theme" (12). The correctness movement, then, should be seen as just one symptom of an increasingly graphocentric culture, one whose primary technology, the alphabet, a system of uniform and interchangeable parts, would become the controlling metaphor in what we still today call "writing courses."

Emerging in reaction to the ascendency of the letter in the eighteenth century, I would argue, has been the attempt to remodel rhetoric in accordance with qualities suggested by speech: spontaneity, individuality, sympathetic responsiveness to a living audience. Derived from a dawning recognition of the rhetorical power implicit in oral culture, and, conversely, the social and psychological dangers of granting greater authority to the book than to what Wordsworth called "the living voice," modern "organic" theories are driven by an often unrecognized urge to put the "rhetor"--which, lest we forget, means *speaker*--back in "rhetoric." Those of us sympathetic to the political goals of the New Rhetoric should, therefore, direct our efforts toward developing techniques, strategies, and attitudes which not only capitalize on the revisionary opportunities afforded by *writing*, but also aid the student in incorporating, in a rhetorical context, the peculiar properties and values of *speech* at all levels of the composing process: invention, arrangement, and style. Such qualities alone, writes Young, "can confer the noble title of an *author*; that is, of one who (to speak accurately) *thinks*, and *composes*; while other invaders of the press, how voluminous, and learned soever, (with due respect be it spoken) only *read* and *write*" (235).

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